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SUBJECT: EDUCATION REFORM OR NOT

Education

¶1. Summary. Most employers and academics consider the Thai education system inadequate in providing a workforce for the country's economic needs. Standardized test scores are dropping, students are not developing critical thinking skills, and they are seen as entering the workforce unprepared. This is one of two cables looking at these issues. The Ministry of Education enacted a 15-year education reform package to address these problems in 1999 but the program is thus far unsuccessful, largely due to a lack of funding, an absence of clear direction from the top, and little demand for improved educational quality from the population. End Summary.

Basics of Education System

¶2. The formal education system in Thailand is divided into two levels: basic education and higher education. Basic education consists of six years of primary education, three years of lower secondary education and three years of upper secondary education. Higher education is provided by colleges and universities and is divided into two levels: associate degrees and degree levels. An associate degree, or diploma level, is the equivalent of a four year undergraduate program in the States. The degree level of higher education is a specialized field, such as doctors and engineers, and is an additional year or two depending on the area of study. In some professions, additional qualifications are required to practice professionally. Masters and Doctorate degrees can be acquired after receiving a bachelor's degree, similar to the U.S. system.

¶3. Vocational education and teacher training is also available. Vocational education is offered at the primary, secondary, and higher education levels. Formal technical and vocational education is conducted at three levels. The upper secondary level leads to a lower certificate of vocational education; the post-secondary level leads to an associate's degree in vocational education, and at the university level, which leads to a degree. Teacher training is offered at the college level and requires an extra two years to complete.

Problems with the System

¶4. The Thai education system is seen by many American Chamber of Commerce member companies as inadequately educating students in two important areas: English and critical thinking. Science, math, and Thai language skills have also recently been dropping to levels below international standards and lower than its neighbors. Standardized national tests administered by the Ministry of Education show that these scores in Thailand are dropping, with neighboring Malaysia, and even Laos, faring better in English, math, and science. Traditionally, schools focus on memorization and classrooms are not interactive. Students subsequently learn to listen, memorize, and repeat information verbatim onto a test. This produces a student population lacking innovation, creativity, and critical thinking skills.

¶5. Thailand's distinct hierarchical and class conscious culture provides little incentive to be innovative, according to the Dean of Public Administration at NIDA University. College degrees are in

part an issue of social class, not education. A person with a college degree is considered a higher class than those without one, regardless of their thinking ability or actual knowledge gained. Many college students do not care about how or what they learn, as long as they do just enough to acquire a degree.

¶6. It is widely considered among the academic community that teachers in basic education are quickly becoming an educational liability. Poor salary and declining social class status are the main factors in deterring would-be high quality teachers. There are few incentives to become a teacher and the brightest students choose other professions. Consequently, much of the teacher workforce consists of average quality graduates at best. There are also no incentives for teachers to undertake continuing education or training and, subsequently, few do. To make up for the poor teaching and in order to do better on the standardized college admissions exam, students that can afford to do so take private classes after school hours.

¶7. The leading universities have very difficult entrance examinations. Thus, only the top students are accepted and this attracts the best professors. Only about 23% of professors have doctorate degrees and they are subsequently clustered together in only a few of the nation's universities. The rest of the students end up attending other institutions that aren't as high quality.

Education Reform

¶8. The Ministry of Education is aware of these issues and is acting on it according to the National Education Act of 1999, which stems from the 1997 Constitution. The reform is outlined in the National Education Plan, which covers the period 2002 - 2016. Many academics believe that the National Education Plan is a good blueprint for successful reform. According to the Ministry of Education, it focuses on 3 broad objectives. First, balanced human development,

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Second, building a society of morality, wisdom, and learning. Third, development of a social environment. Through these objectives, it is hoped that the National Education Plan will 1) lead to a knowledge-based economy and society, 2) promote continuous learning, and 3) involve all segments of society in designing and decision-making concerning public activities. The Ministry of Education is currently trying to implement these changes by reforming the curriculum, basic education learning process, and admission processes.

¶9. The curriculum for basic and higher levels of education is set to accommodate each individual's age and potential. The basic education curriculum is broken up into the national level and the institutional level. There is an emphasis on Thai identity and promoting good citizenship on the national level. Basic education covers 12 years and includes eight groups of subjects: Thai Language, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Religion and Culture, Health and Physical Education, Art, Career and Technology-Related Education, and Foreign Language. A new nationwide teacher training program for various levels of teacher personnel has also been organized. At the institutional level, educational institutions are required to develop a curriculum that "benefits the community and society."

¶10. The learning process is supposed to focus on the individual student and the top priority is self-development. There are six steps to the basic education level: 1) teachers are encouraged to develop their own teaching materials, 2) teacher training about individual learning, 3) revising standards for disabled students, 4) "Learning Paths of Thai People" project that promotes learning methods, 5) "Education Improvement Model," which incorporates teachers and learning technologies, and 6) strengthening the capacity of the Royal Thai Government to carry out education reform.

¶11. Standardized tests will be given in grades 3, 6, and 9 to see if the students qualify for gifted programs, and these gifted students can attend anywhere they want although there will be no government stipend for them. The higher education admissions

process will now include the student's GPA, class rank, and entrance examination score. Previously, the entrance examination score was the only criteria.

Sounds good, but...

¶12. So far, the Ministry of Education has succeeded only in expanding educational opportunity as the quantity of students increase. Caretaker PM Thaksin successfully expanded the mandatory education requirement from 9 to 12 years and increased the quantity of students, but the government has not provided anything else, including additional classrooms, teachers, or materials.

¶13. The Secretary General of the National Economic and Social Development Board told us that rural people feel that education should be free and are not willing to pay more than they already due for things like school uniforms. The Thaksin government had tried to implement a plan to decentralize responsibility for education, making each province responsible for its own education results, including how education funds should be apportioned. Teachers demonstrated against this change, officially because they argued that provincial governments do not have the necessary expertise to take charge of education. However, the unofficial reason is that the status of a person who is a provincial employee is lower than that of someone with a national-level position. The decentralization plan has since been shelved.

¶14. According to the Office of National Education Standards Quality Assessment (ONESQA) Director, the National Education Plan faces a severe shortage of funding that prevents educational institutions from achieving these goals. The Democratic Party of Thailand controlled political power and supported the National Education Act in 1999. However, when the Thai Rak Thai party took control in 2001, the Director claims that "education became a forgotten issue" and the National Education Plan did not receive enough funding to properly implement. The result is an increase in the number of students without a parallel increase in quality. The teacher problem continues and rural schools are not upgrading their facilities.

¶15. Comment: The Thai's are well aware of the shortcomings of their education system, but reform seems to focus more on buzzwords than on measurable outcomes. There is also the question of education reform as a priority for the government and the society at large. Since the beginning of the Constitutional Monarchy in 1932, there have been two educational reforms - in 1977 and this one - both of which were surrounded by similar social environments: political instability and an emphasis on economic advancement over other priorities. Academics tell us that the recent government has so far focused on tangible economic goals, such as building infrastructure, rather than the long-term development of human resources. And that although the education reform looks good on paper, it has yet to bear any fruit or be close to fully implemented.

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¶16. Comment: It is doubtful that additional effort will be put into education reform in the near future despite near-universal agreement that more needs to be done in order for Thailand to compete in an increasingly globalized world. Thai's are aware of the situation and the problems that it causes, but it is not seen as an immediate priority, especially in rural areas where most Thais still live. Education reform talks have been an issue for much longer than the current political instability, and the only result from the extensive agenda is an increase in student numbers. With the political crisis continuing to unfold, education reform is far down the priority ladder, regardless of what party eventually takes power.

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